

The University of Chicago

CRITERIA FOR THE SIGN 'GOD' IN
EMPIRICAL RELIGIOUS
INQUIRY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

JUNE, 1942

By
GEORGE ROBERT BARTLETT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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I. THE SIGN 'GOD' AS AN EMPIRICAL RELIGIOUS TERM

A. The Criteria for Distinguishing Religious Signs from Non-religious Signs.

1. It would appear that any sign was a religious sign when and only when it satisfies the following conditions:
 - a) When the user employs the sign to express his devotion and commitment to those aspects of his environment which he esteems to be most capable of conserving and increasing the value of the world in which he lives
 - b) When the sign tends to motivate the living of the person employing the sign in conformity to the requirements of his devotion and commitment
 - c) When the sign calls out or tends to call out the same responses in some other individuals as are called out within the user of the sign himself

B. The Requirements for the Empirical Usage of Religious Language.

1. All uses of the sign 'God' are not empirical uses.
2. An empirical use of the sign 'God' involves a denotatum.
3. For a sign to have a denotatum, the denotatum need not be directly observed by the interpreter.
4. In all instances of religious usage where the sign 'God'

¹The thesis is presented here only in outline form. For the development of the following propositions the reader is referred to the dissertation itself.

To understand the semiotical terminology which occurs in the development of the material of this thesis, the reader must familiarize himself with the monograph of Charles W. Morris entitled Foundations of a Theory of Signs, Vol. I, No. 2 of the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, ed. by Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles W. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938).

has a denotatum, such a denotatum is subject to the general considerations as the denotatum of any other sign in any other area of scientific investigation.

5. Expressions containing the sign 'God' are not the only expressions which may be said to have the same designatum as the sign 'God' in a particular semantical system S.
6. To say that the word God is semantically synonymous with the word X or the phrase Y is not to say that 'God,' X, or Y are pragmatically synonymous.
7. The consideration of 'God,' X, and Y in terms of the pragmatically synonymous rules for S may show that 'God,' X, and Y are pragmatically synonymous, or it may show that any two of these are pragmatically synonymous, or that none are pragmatically synonymous.

II. THE SIGN 'GOD' WITHIN CERTAIN CONTEXTUAL SETTINGS

A. The Implications of Empirical Religious Language for a Religious Philosophy.

1. The choice of empirical religious language does not determine the particular system which must be developed --any choice which is consistent within the empirical requirements is a possibility.
2. The choice of empirical religious language does not entirely dictate the proportions and dimensions to which a particular religious philosophy must be developed.
3. The acceptance of empirical religious language does determine the empirical tests to which the contents of such a system must conform.
4. To approach the status of a thorough going inquiry a religious philosophy must invite the consideration of all phenomena which come within the scope of its investigation, and must continue exhaustively to explore and investigate all such phenomena without reservation.

B. The Implications of Empirical Religious Language for the Individual.

1. Signs which designate but do not denote are acceptable within the framework of the empirical religious language which we have agreed upon only as setting forth propositions which we call empirical hypotheses.
2. To be sharply differentiated from empirical hypotheses are all instances in which the signs denote as well as designate. Propositions in which the signs denote as well as designate we here call empirical truths.
3. Discourse which meets all of the conditions which we have required for empirical religious language necessitates that the individual formulate such propositions as we have called empirical truths.

4. Any sign combination which the individual employs is potentially subject to empirical investigation by any one who chooses to make such an investigation.
5. The sign vehicle 'God' may occur in an infinite number of cases.
6. Only a finite number of cases in which 'God' occurs can ever be examined, and the evidence for 'God' (X or Y) at any specified time is necessarily based upon the limited number of confirming instances which have been considered. The resultant data must never be seized upon as final and conclusive for all time.
7. The nature of the empirical method is such that it will not provide a religious dogma within which the individual may seclude himself for eternity.
8. When empirical methodology is applied in the area of religious investigation the harmonized adjustment of religion and science should be the desired result if religion and science are to enjoy a relationship of mutual enhancement and enrichment.

C. The Implications of Empirical Religious Language for the Group.

1. 'God,' X, or Y may function in the same way semantically and still not function in the same way pragmatically when viewed in terms of the group.
2. To expect to find that the same sign will express and motivate in the same way for all groups is foolish.
3. There is no empirical guarantee that any religious sign will serve in the same way forever.
4. There is likewise no empirical guarantee that some religious sign will not continue for an indeterminate period to call out or tend to call out the same responses in other individuals as are called out within the user of the sign himself.
5. Religious signs express and motivate under conditions similar to those under which other signs express and motivate.
6. So long as a religious sign calls out or tends to call out the same response in other individuals as are called out within the user of the sign himself that particular religious sign may be expected to appear in the discourse pattern of that group.
7. When a religious sign ceases to function in the above manner it may be expected that such a religious sign will gradually disappear from the discourse pattern of that group.

8. It is an empirical fact that the discourse pattern of a group must and will change.
 9. To seize upon 'God,' X, or Y and to force some or all of these signs into the discourse pattern of all groups would be a mistaken understanding of the empirical data under which the sign vehicles of a particular group function.
- D. The Implications of Empirical Religious Language for the Interpretant.
1. Every interpreter will not himself be directly or indirectly aware that the sign which he employs has a denotatum.
 2. Semiotically blind faith is the insistence of the interpreter that his sign has a denotatum even when empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that his sign has no denotatum.
 3. Religious statements may and do have other functions to perform than that of conveying confirmable propositions.
 4. Empirical religious signs (signs which meet our previous requirements for such signs) do not prevent an individual from belonging to a group even though he is not himself directly or indirectly aware of the denotatum of his signs.
 5. To require that a religious sign must denote is not to deprive religious language from appearing in poetry or some other form of art.
 6. When the simple overt ritualistic response of the individual is placed above the implications of his religion for his society and for his own personal adjustment in terms of his societal setting, the religion which espouses such a result is misguided in its task, and the interpretant of 'God,' X, or Y in such cases reflects the weakness of the signs themselves.
 7. Even in the case of empirical religion there is no guarantee that some of the interpretants which emerge within its setting will not be restricted to a simple overt ritualistic response and nothing more.
 8. The distinguishing characteristic of empirical religion is not that it excludes interpretants of the above mentioned type. The distinguishing characteristic of empirical religion is that it insists that any interpretant be subject to the same tentativeness which characterizes all other factors of the semiotical process in an empirical setting.
 9. When newly gathered evidence requires it, empirical religion demands that all components of the process of semiosis be revised.

10. Empirical religion recognizes the above fact and attempts to characterize itself by making all of its devotees increasingly aware of whatever there may be to be discovered about the subject of its investigation.
11. Empirical religion does not exist through withholding information from its adherents.
12. Empirical religion is the result of interaction and exchange on the part of its members.
13. Regardless of whether the devotees of a religion employ empirical religious language or not the religion which they espouse may be desirable or undesirable when interpreted with regard to some particular ends-in-view.
14. A religion which arises out of a setting in which empirical religious signs are used is a religion which does not depend solely upon an apologetic to justify its claim to a place as an empirical religion.
15. Empirical methodology may fall into disrepute, and if such be the case empirical religion may be expected to share a fate similar to that of other empirical products in other areas of empirical investigation which face the same conditions.

III. THE SIGN 'GOD' AND EMPIRICAL RELIGIOUS INQUIRY

A. The Place of Theism in Empirical Religious Inquiry.

1. If theism is to be established it is at least necessary to hold that some attributes of the proposed theistic substance be shown to be unexcelled by the same attributes in all other substances (actual or possible).
2. If the attributes of the proposed theistic substance are claimed to be peculiar to it alone, it must then be shown that those attributes of the theistic substance which are alleged to be unique do not appear as attributes in all other substances (actual or possible).
3. The two possibilities for theism set forth above are accepted here as legislative for all attempts to establish a theistic substance which can be referred to by 'God.'
4. If any substance is to be established as theistic the requirements for the empirical investigation of such a substance are that it must be investigated in space-time.
5. All substances in space-time will have relationships with other substances in space-time.
6. Even if some were to mean only one the proposition to be established empirically would be: One attribute of the theistic substance is unexcelled by the same attribute in all other substances (actual or possible).

7. The above proposition could not be established empirically since it requires that all actual and all possible instances be considered before the theistic substance can be denoted as designated.
8. Only a finite number of cases can ever be tested, and consequently it can never be known whether the theistic substance has one attribute which is unexcelled by the same attribute in all other substances (actual or possible).
9. Even when the attributes of the theistic substance are claimed to be unique the result is the same, and the theistic substance cannot be shown to denote as designated.
10. To introduce theism as a qualified thesis would be to state it in one of the two following forms. The first way would be to say that the theistic substance has at least one attribute in which it is unexcelled by any other substance (actual or possible) which has yet been tested. The second way would be to say that the theistic substance has at least one attribute which appears in no other substance (actual or possible) which has yet been tested.
11. However, when the phrase "which has yet been tested" is inserted, anyone may choose any attribute whatsoever and establish some substance which meets one of the two aforementioned conditions for a theistic substance so qualified.
12. Under such conditions the world may be populated with theistic substances.
13. To attempt to correct this condition by declaring a particular attribute (or a particular set of attributes) to be the theistic attribute does not disallow anyone else from declaring that some other attribute (or some other set of attributes) is the theistic attribute. Consequently the problem is not solved.
14. Since there is no satisfactory way of establishing theism empirically only one alternative remains. Such an alternative is to retain theism as an analytic thesis within the empirical system.
15. The retention of theism under the above mentioned conditions has no empirical basis upon which to assert its claims.
16. Theism retained under the conditions of an analytic thesis does not in any way describe events and is entirely independent of empirical confirmation.
17. To retain theism under the conditions of an analytic thesis is a choice which may be made by anyone.

18. Theism under the conditions of an analytic thesis must not be accorded any descriptive function.
19. If theism is allowed to have any descriptive function attached to it, theism may be brought back into the light of empirical investigation, and the objections to all attempts to establish theism empirically are again validly raised against it.
20. Once theism leaves the setting of the analytic and enters into the synthetic it is doomed to face the empirical complications described above.

B. The Relationship between 'God,' 'Brahma,' 'Allah,' 'Buddha,' Etc., in Empirical Religious Inquiry.

1. 'Allah,' 'God,' 'Brahma,' 'Buddha,' etc., are all terms which function in semiosis.
2. Because these terms function in semiosis they all involve a sign vehicle, designatum, interpretant, and interpreter.
3. Under semiotical investigation the syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic dimensions of all of these signs can be developed.
4. All of these signs are religious signs which operate to some extent in some cultures.
5. When the cultural differences between people become so great as to warrant the usage of such terms as Christians, Hindus, Mohammedans, Buddhists, etc., the differences in their signs have reached such proportions as to allow one to find very little in common between the syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic dimensions of their signs.
6. In any culture remote instances can be found where people have taken over the signs of another cultural group and adapted these signs to the peculiarities of their indigenous culture.
7. 'Buddha,' 'Allah,' 'God,' 'Brahma,' etc., may also be empirical religious signs when they are found to be religious signs which meet our requirements for empirical religious signs.
8. To require that 'God,' 'Allah,' 'Buddha,' 'Brahma,' etc., as empirical religious signs must have a denotatum is not to affirm or deny that any of these signs have the same denotatum in any specific instance of their usage.
9. We are not here investigating the value structure which any specific denotatum sustains.
10. Different signs may be used to refer to the same object or situation.

11. The same sign vehicle may be used to refer to different objects or situations.
 12. The degree to which a sign calls out, or tends to call out, the same responses in some members of the group as are called out within the user of the sign himself may be called the coherence of a religious sign.
 13. The degree to which a sign calls out, or tends to call out, similar responses in nonmembers of the group to those called out within the group members themselves may be called the adherence of a religious sign.
 14. All of the signs which we are considering here will have some degree of coherence and some degree of adherence.
 15. To no slight degree any of these religious signs are dependent upon their coherence and their adherence for their spread and survival.
 16. Empirical dogma is to require that a particular religious sign be restricted at all times and by all users to the same unalterable denotatum.
 17. When the denotatum is established the task of empirical inquiry is but begun.
 18. Any of the signs which we are considering here may become empirical evils when they are set up under empirical conditions which are thought to exhaust their empirical truth.
 19. A properly oriented empirical inquiry can recognize conditions of extreme adherence and conditions of extreme coherence and attempt to resuscitate or further promote the growth of the signs in the culture.
 20. Religious signs are not ends in themselves, but are important only because they are instrumental to the end product of religious commitment and devotion which they serve.
- C. The Basis of Authority in Empirical Religious Inquiry.
1. In empirical religious inquiry, 'God' (X or Y) is not the legislative authority upon which the statements within the inquiry rest their case.
 2. If 'God,' X, or Y are used in the development of the material within an empirical religious inquiry they must be understood to be abbreviated descriptions for an entity, substance, object, thing, property of a thing, relation of a thing, etc., which is capable of being verified under the conditions of empirical inquiry.
 3. When the choice to use the sign vehicle 'God' (X or Y) is made within an empirical system of religious inquiry

it requires that the syntactical, pragmatical, and semantical implications of the sign be clearly set forth within the treatment in which the term is employed.

4. The denotatum of 'God' (X or Y) is not necessarily altered by having the sign vehicle retained, changed, modified, or even abandoned.
5. Anyone may employ 'God' to designate whatever he chooses so long as choice alone is the only criterion to be observed in making such a selection.
6. Empirical systems which are developed within the area of empirical religious inquiry should be expected to represent the work of logical positivists, pragmatists, empirical-rationalist, empirical-metaphysicians, etc. The area of empirical religious inquiry along with other areas of empirical inquiry will reflect the basic differences in the points of view of the inquirers.
7. There is no legislative rule which determines what the data of empirical religious inquiry must be.
8. The authority for any statement in any empirical inquiry is the requirement that the data be verified under the conditions of the empirical methodology which is acceptable at the time that the data are advanced.
9. To the degree to which the area of empirical religious inquiry is one of the more recent of empirical studies it must be expected that it will be characterized by the same unsettled state of affairs which characterize the early stages of any study.
10. Under empirical inquiry authority is no better than the credibility of the witnesses.
11. Under empirical inquiry observation is no more accurate than the techniques which are employed in gaining access to the data which are under consideration.
12. The area of empirical religious inquiry is not solely dependent upon its own work for its data. Rather it is greatly dependent upon the findings in other areas of investigation for much of the data which it employs.
13. Because the sign vehicle 'God' in an empirical system of inquiry is an abbreviated description for certain empirical data, such data must be subject to confirmation under the conditions of empirical methodology.
14. Before progress can be made in the area of empirical religious inquiry the authority for the statements of such an inquiry must be realized to be no more certain than the basic empirical methodological findings in any other area of empirical inquiry.
15. In the above sense the basis of authority in empirical religious inquiry has a definitely tentative character,

and the findings are subject to the same revision under the same general conditions as the findings in any other area of empirical investigation.

16. There is ample evidence in the area of empirical religious inquiry at the present time to warrant the statement that a limited number of objective investigations have been made.
 17. The basis of authority in all instances where such objective investigation has been accomplished has been the best empirical methodology which has been developed in the more general areas of "unified science."
 18. Much of the work of empirical religious inquiry will be meaningless to the person who is not himself engaged in the capacity of a trained investigator within the area of empirical religious inquiry.
 19. Certain popular interpretations will assist such people in grasping the most general aspects of the work which is being done within the field of empirical religious inquiry.
 20. A proper translation of the findings of empirical religious inquiry at the level of common-sense knowledge will assist the individual in knowing that his religion is securely rooted in the results of thorough investigation.
 21. The future hope of empirical religion stands upon the recognition that its basis of authority rests within empirical methodology.
- D. The Function of Empirical Hypotheses in Empirical Religious Inquiry.
1. The distinction between the empirical hypothesis and the empirical truth does not rest upon the fact that the empirical truth is final and absolute for all time.
 2. Any empirical truth may later be found to have been mistakenly held, i.e., further empirical evidence may not lend further confirmation to the proposition. (What has been said of course applies even to the proposition just stated.)
 3. When an empirical truth is found to have been mistakenly held, such an empirical truth reverts to an empirical hypothesis which may be reaffirmed, modified, or abandoned, depending upon the results of further empirical evidence which is evolved.
 4. Universal pragmatistical and semantical rules for the abandonment or retention of an empirical hypothesis, i.e., rules which apply universally to all cases, have not yet been formulated in the area of empirical inquiry.

5. At any stage in the development of empirical religious inquiry the same general rules which govern probability in any other area of empirical inquiry also apply to statements in the area of empirical religious inquiry.
6. In any event it seems far from unreasonable to insist that empirical religious inquiry seek results which are among those findings which yield as certain empirical knowledge as possible.
7. The empirical hypothesis is as important in the area of empirical religious inquiry as it is in any other area of empirical inquiry.
8. Until the hypothesis is stated what is to be verified is not clearly set forth.
9. In stating an empirical hypothesis the individual proposes to speak empirically. Whether he actually speaks empirically or not is a question which is verified in direct ratio to the confirmation of his hypothesis.
10. When one employs empirical religious signs (signs which denote, etc.) he speaks empirically in direct ratio to the weight of evidence upon which the empirical denotata of his signs rest.
11. Discourse at the level of common-sense knowledge is discourse which does not sharply distinguish between designata and denotata.
12. For any discourse to be empirically oriented the signs must at least have empirical designation.
13. This does not mean that the empirical hypothesis of empirical religious inquiry is nothing more than a casual statement at the level of common-sense knowledge which happens to have empirical designata. Rather the empirical hypothesis of empirical religious inquiry is a carefully chosen and purposively formulated proposition, the end product of which is consummated only through arriving at the empirical truth which results from the verification of the hypothesis. (The hypothesis is necessarily neither true nor false until confirmed or refuted.)
14. When through direct and indirect observation the empirical hypothesis is found to be compatible with the observed and relevant empirical facts, the empirical hypothesis is acceptable as an empirical truth until further evidence increases the coefficient of error to the extent where the empirical truth is no longer tenable.
15. Empirical truth as we have defined it allows that 'God' may not always denote the same object or situation. This allows for possible instances where 'God' denotes Q and 'God' denotes M may both be empirical truths.

16. In cases such as the above where O and M are not self contradictory with the observed and relevant empirical facts, the choice for 'God' to denote O rather than M, or vice versa, rests upon syntactical and pragmatical considerations. (We have of course admitted that an inquiry concerning the value structure which these respective truths supported might result in a choice for either one or the other of the empirical truths. Such a choice we have said would also be based upon semantical considerations which are not involved in the issue as we have considered it here.)
17. If O and M contradict each other both hypotheses ('God' designates O and 'God' designates M) must be re-examined, and another empirical truth evolved which will either confirm one of the two hypotheses, result in the abandonment of both of the hypotheses, or give rise to some combination of the two hypotheses which results in a reformulated empirical truth.
18. The end product of the empirical hypothesis is the empirical truth which results only if such an empirical hypothesis is confirmed.
19. Since the range of designata will always exceed the range of denotata, the empirical hypothesis in empirical religious inquiry allows for an extended search, but a limited result.

IV. CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE SIGN 'GOD'

- A. When Is 'God' a Term in the Object-language, the Metalanguage, and the Thing-language?
 1. By object-language we shall understand the language which is being examined.
 2. By metalanguage we shall understand the language in which the results of the examination are stated.
 3. By thing-language we shall understand a language (or, that part of an object-language) the signs of which do not have for their designata other signs, but instead have things or situations (i.e., relations between things in space-time process, functions of things in space-time process, etc.) for the designata of their signs.
 4. Under semiotical investigation 'God' in any specified instance of its usage may prove to be a term in the object-language and a term in the thing-language, or 'God' may prove to be a term only in the object-language.
 5. When 'God' is retained as an empirical term it must not be confined to the object-language.
 6. Pseudo thing-sentences are to be avoided not because they are irreligious but because they are unempirical.

B. The Basis for the Choice of Using or Not Using the Sign Vehicle 'God' as an Empirical Religious Term.

1. When one chooses to use the term 'God,' or when one chooses not to use the term 'God,' he does so in either case because he anticipates that his expectations will not be disappointed when he makes such a choice.
2. Since language for the most part has a public character which involves the ability to communicate with an organism other than one's self, it is reasonable to conclude that either of the two choices (to use or not to use the sign vehicle 'God') which we are considering are most generally made with the expectation of calling out a response in some other organism similar to the response which is called out within the chooser himself.
3. Whether a man is called a humanist, a naturalist, a practical idealist, an empirical theist, a naturalistic theist, a humanistic theist, or something else, may be an important entree for his address to a particular group, but such distinctions are of little significance so far as the empirical use of terms is concerned. Either the terms are empirical or nonempirical, and what a man is called has nothing to do with the empirical requirements for religious terms.

C. Prognosis for 'God' as an Empirical Religious Term if the World View Becomes Predominately Empirical.

1. The continuance or the discontinuance of the sign 'God' as an empirical religious term in a world which is predominately characterized by an empirical world view will depend upon whether or not the pragmatic dimension of 'God' can be disassociated from its supernatural background. As an empirical religious term 'God' will be retained only if it is capable of arousing expectations which are compatible with its empirical orientation.

